FROM THE BOOKSHELF #165 NOVEMBER 2, 1976
ROGER LYONS

SLAPSTICK
BY ~~ROGER~~ Kurt VONNEGUT

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICABRINGS YOU ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES .... FROM THE BOOKSHELF .... IN WHICH WE DISCUSS BOOKS AMERICANS ARE CURRENTLY READING. TODAY... A NOVEL BY KURT VONNEGUT ENTITLED SLAPSTICK PUBLISHED BY DELACORTE PRESS. VOA'S BOOK EDITOR, ROGER LYONS, HAS THIS REPORT.

EDITOR: KURT VONNEGUT, DESPITE MIDDLE-AGE BULGE AT THE TIME, WAS ONE OF THE IDOLS OF THE RADICAL, HIPPY YOUTH OF THE SIXTIES. NOW, PAST FIFTY-THREE, HIS NEW NOVEL SLAPSTICK IS PURE, VINTAGE VONNEGUT. HIS THEME IS STILL THE SAME -- LOOK AT WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE WORLD -- MAGNIFY IT AND DISTANCE YOURSELF FROM IT BY INVESTING IT WITH AN AURA OF NIGHTMARISH FANTASY AND YOU WILL BE IRRESISTIBLY DRAWN TO THE CONCLUSION THAT ONLY ONE DIAGNOSIS FITS THE GLOBAL CONDITION -- MADNESS. QUITE UNDERSTANDABLY A WHOLE GENERATION OF ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT YOUTH LATCHED ONTO THIS IMAGE. SLAPSTICK OPENS WITH A PROLOGUE THAT SUMS UP ITS PHILOSOPHY:

VOICE: THIS IS THE CLOSEST I WILL EVER COME TO WRITING AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. I HAVE CALLED IT SLAPSTICK BECAUSE IT IS GROTESQUE, SITUATIONAL POETRY -- LIKE THE SLAPSTICK FILM COMEDIES, ESPECIALLY THOSE OF LAUREL AND HARDY, OF LONG AGO. IT IS ABOUT WHAT LIFE FEELS LIKE TO ME. THERE ARE ALL THESE TESTS OF MY LIMITED ABILITY AND INTELLIGENCE. THEY GO ON AND ON. THE FUNDAMENTAL JOKE WITH LAUREL AND HARDY, IT SEEMS TO ME, WAS THAT THEY DID THEIR BEST WITH EVERY TEST. THEY NEVER FAILED TO BARGAIN IN GOOD FAITH WITH THEIR

VOICE: (CONT'D) DESTINIES, AND WERE SCREAMINGLY ADORABLE AND FUNNY ON THAT ACCOUNT.

EDITOR: THE INSPIRATION FOR HIS NOVEL, VONNEGUT TELLS US, HAPPENED DURING A PLANE TRIP WITH HIS ADMIRED SCIENTIST BROTHER, BERNARD, WHO HELPED DISCOVER HOW TO MAKE RAIN BY SEEDING CLOUDS WITH PELLETS OF SILVER IODIDE. THEY ARE ON THEIR WAY TO THE FUNERAL OF A FAVORITE UNCLE, WHO ALSO HAPPENED TO BE AN ATHEIST AND AN ALCOHOLIC. VONNEGUT LOOKS AT THE EMPTY SEAT BETWEEN THEM, AND THINKS OF HIS DEAD SISTER WHO OTHERWISE COULD BE SITTING THERE.

VOICE: "SHE WASN'T IN THAT SEAT AND ON HER WAY TO HER BELOVED UNCLE ALEX'S FUNERAL, FOR SHE HAD DIED AMONG STRANGERS IN NEW JERSEY, OF CANCER --AT THE AGE OF FORTY-ONE. 'SOAP OPERA!' SHE SAID TO MY BROTHER AND ME ONE TIME, WHEN DISCUSSING HER OWN IMPENDING DEATH. SHE WOULD BE LEAVING FOUR YOUNG BOYS BEHIND, WITHOUT ANY MOTHER. SLAPSTICK, SHE SAID. HI HO."

EDITOR: THE REMINISCING STARTS THE AUTHOR DAY-DREAMING OF A HUNDRED-YEAR OLD MAN LIVING IN THE LOBBY OF THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, AMID THE RUINS OF MANHATTAN WHERE THE GREEN DEATH AND THE ALABAMA FLU HAVE KILLED ALL BUT A HANDFUL OF INHABITANTS. THE MAN IS DR. WILBUR DAFFODIL-11 SWAIN, A SEVEN-FOOT, UGLY MONSTER OF A MAN WITH SIX FINGERS ON EACH HAND AND FOUR NIPPLES. THE BULK OF THE BOOK CONSISTS OF THE OLD MAN'S MEMOIRS, WRITTEN AS HE AWAITS HIS OWN IMMINENT DEATH. WILBUR DESCRIBES HIS IDYLLICALLY HAPPY CHILDHOOD WITH HIS TWIN-SISTER, ELIZA SIMILARLY DISFIGURED. BECAUSE THEY

EDITOR: (CONT'D) ARE SUCH FREAKS, THEY HAVE BEEN HIDDEN FROM THE WORLD IN AN OUT-OF-THE-WAY MANSION IN THE COUNTRY BY THEIR WEALTHY PARENTS. THEY HAVE SERVANTS TO CATER TO THEIR EVERY NEED. THE TWO PRETEND TO BE IDIOTS, BUT ACTUALLY THEY ARE EXCEPTIONALLY INTELLIGENT. AS A TEAM, THEY DEVELOP A REAL GENIUS, WITH ELIZA BEING THE INTUITIVE SIDE AND WILBUR, THE RATIONAL. BUT ONE DAY THEY OVERHEAR A CONVERSATION IN WHICH THEIR PARENTS EXPRESS SHAME AND UNHAPPINESS ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN. SO THE NEXT NIGHT, THEY PAINT A BIG SIGN ON A BED SHEET AND WHEN THEIR PARENTS WAKE UP, THIS IS WHAT THEY READ:

VOICE: DEAR MATER AND PATER: WE CAN NEVER BE PRETTY BUT WE CAN BE AS SMART OR AS DUMB AS THE WORLD REALLY WANTS US TO BE.

YOUR FAITHFUL SERVANTS,
ELIZA MELLON SWAIN
WILBUR ROCKEFELLER SWAIN.

EDITOR: UNFORTUNATELY, INSTEAD OF THIS REVELATION RELIEVING THEIR PARENTS' DISTRESS, IT ONLY INCREASES. TO ADVISE THEM ON WHAT SHOULD BE DONE, THEY CALL IN A FASCIST-MINDED PSYCHOLOGIST WHOSE MALEVOLENT JEALOUSY RESULTS IN THE TWINS BEING SEPARATED AT AGE FIFTEEN. ELIZA EMIGRATES TO MARS WITH THE CHINESE AND WILBUR BECOMES PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, USING THE CAMPAIGN SLOGAN "LONESOME NO MORE," WHICH BY THE WAY IS THE SUBTITLE OF THE NOVEL.

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AT ONE POINT, HOWEVER, THEY GET TOGETHER AGAIN, LONG ENOUGH TO WRITE THE MOST POPULAR CHILD-REARING MANUAL IN HISTORY, SO YOU WENT AND HAD A BABY. BUT THAT DOESN'T PREVENT MUTUAL

EDITOR: (CONT'D) RECRIMINATIONS AND ONCE ELIZA ACCUSES WILBUR OF DESCRIBING HER AS A TUMOR THAT HAD TO BE REMOVED.

VOICE: "I NEVER SAID THAT," I SAID. "OTHER PEOPLE SAID IT, AND YOU BELIEVED THEM," SHE SAID. "THAT'S WORSE. YOU'RE A FASCIST, WILBUR. THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE," "THAT'S ABSURD," I SAID. "FASCISTS ARE INFERIOR PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE IT WHEN SOMEBODY TELLS THEM THEY'RE SUPERIOR," SHE SAID. "NOW, NOW --" I SAID. "THEN THEY WANT EVERYBODY ELSE TO DIE," SHE SAID.

EDITOR: AFTER AN ORGY OF TOGETHERNESS, THEY SEPARATE NEVER TO SEE EACH OTHER AGAIN.

AFTER A NEVER-ENDING SUCCESSION OF ZANY EPISODES, THE NOVEL CONCLUDES WITH WILBUR'S DESCRIPTION OF HOW HE WAS COMPELLED AS PRESIDENT TO SELL THE ORIGINAL LOUISIANA PURCHASE TO STEWART ORIOLE-2 MOTT, THE KING OF MICHIGAN, FOR A DOLLAR HE NEVER ACTUALLY RECEIVED.

CLEARLY, ANY CONDENSED ACCOUNT OF THE CONTENT OF A BOOK LIKE THIS IS BOUND TO BE CONFUSING, FOR ITS SIGNIFICANCE LIES IN THE UNSPOKEN IMPLICATIONS. BUT READERS WOULD BE WRONG IN CONCLUDING THAT VONNEGUT IS TOTALLY NIHILISTIC. TO BE SURE, HE STILL HOLDS THAT ELABORATE PROGRAMS FOR MASS PROGRESS AND UNIVERSAL LOVE ARE FRAUDS BUT HE DOES HAVE SOME CONSTRUCTIVE OBSERVATIONS. HERE IS ONE ON LOVE:

VOICE: LOVE IS WHERE YOU FIND IT. I THINK IT IS FOOLISH TO GO LOOKING FOR IT, AND I THINK IT CAN OFTEN BE POISONOUS. I WISH THAT PEOPLE WHO ARE CONVENTIONALLY SUPPOSED TO LOVE EACH OTHER WOULD SAY TO EACH OTHER, WHEN THEY FIGHT, "PLEASE -- A LITTLE LESS LOVE, AND A LITTLE MORE COMMON DECENCY."

EDITOR: WHETHER TODAY'S MORE DOCILE AND RECONCILED GENERATION WILL STILL BE INTRIGUED BY VONNEGUT'S THESES OR FIND HIS FANTASIES THE RESULT OF ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE REMAINS TO BE SEEN. THE CHANCES ARE THAT HIS BOOK WILL BE SUFFICIENTLY LOVED OR LOATHED TO SELL A GOODLY NUMBER OF COPIES.

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO A DISCUSSION OF KURT VONNEGUT'S NOVEL SLAPSTICK. LISTEN NEXT WEEK (AT THIS TIME) FOR ANOTHER BOOK AMERICANS ARE CHOOSING ... FROM THE BOOKSHELF.

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